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Trust Me I'm a Doctor - disease can blind you

BBC health show Trust Me, I'm a Doctor features the pioneering work of Southend Hospital's rheumatology department.

The hospital is leading the way in the treatment and education of a little-known condition that can cause sudden and irreversible sight loss.

Giant cell arteritis is a condition in which medium and large arteries, usually in the head and neck, become inflamed.

It's sometimes called temporal arteritis because the arteries around the temples are usually affected.

Symptoms include:

Aching and soreness in and around the temples

Jaw muscle pain while eating

Vision loss

Polymyalgia - an aching and stiffness in both shoulders and thighs accompanied by weight loss, night sweats, anaemia and tiredness

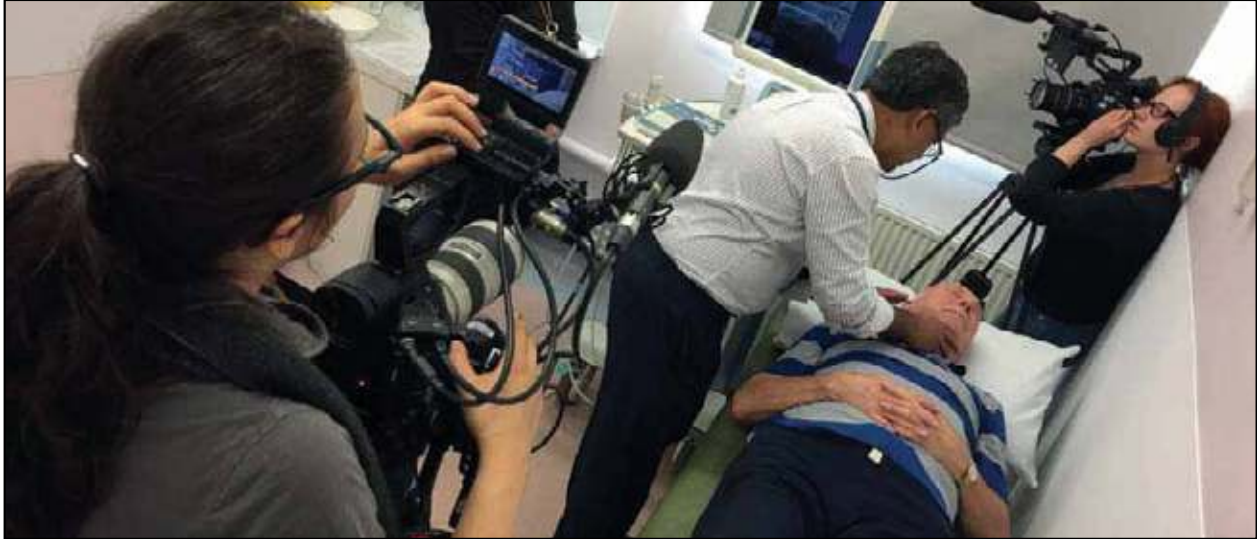
Spearheading the rheumatology department's work with the condition is Professor Bhaskar Dasgupta.

He has developed a fast-track pathway which ensures rapid specialist review and treatment of patients with suspected giant cell arteritis.

Professor Dasgupta was quick to point out how critical swift treatment is.

He said "We now realise that if we are to avoid irreversible sight loss, as a result of giant cell arteritis, it needs to be treated with

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■ Trust Me I'm a Doctor – Professor Dasgupta working with Roger Keay as the documentary is filmed

as much urgency as the warning signs of stroke or heart attack.”

Another major aspect of Professor Dasgupta's work is education and awareness and he wants to ensure early recognition of the condition becomes enshrined in GP training and education.

He added: “It's like the “Act FAST” stroke campaign which raises public and professional awareness of early stroke prevention. The stroke pathway uses the slogan “Time is Brain” but we are

using the slogan “Time is Sight”. If you can get people on to treatment quickly, you can prevent sight loss.”

One patient who was fortunate to be diagnosed early and successfully treated, was Roger Keay, 77, from Thorpe Bay, who also features in the BBC2 episode which aired on Wednesday.

Mr Keay said: “I asked Professor Dasgupta if I will go blind eventually because of giant cell arteritis and he said “100 per cent

guaranteed that we have stopped the problem”.

“I've lost some field of vision but it's not a problem, I still drive, play golf, ride my bike. I'm still doing everything I used to. If it wasn't for this treatment I would now be blind.”

A campaign to raise awareness and understanding of two debilitating conditions that can lead to blindness and physical disability is being launched in Southend by the charity PMRGCAuk.

The patient support group for Polymyalgia Rheumatica and Giant Cell Arteritis – is also working to raise public awareness around the conditions and share the latest research in causes, treatment and management of the condition.

A roadshow was held in Southend last week in conjunction with the hospital.

Each year, around 3,000 people are thought to lose their sight as a result of late diagnosis.